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A HALLOWEEN STORY

For Joy R.
(with a nod to Julie H.)

It was a Sunday afternoon in late October, and the University of Michigan's zoology department was nearly deserted. Professor Mortimer was taking advantage of the peace and quiet to work on his magnum opus, Bats of the Great Lakes Region: Their Anatomy, Physiology, and Behavior. His concentration was broken by a knock at his door.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened and a tall, lean stranger stepped into the office, followed by a man with a shambling gait, vacant eyes, and ill-fitting clothes who carried a large attaché case.

"Professor Mortimer," said the stranger. His penetrating gaze made the professor slightly uncomfortable.

"What can I do for you?" asked the latter.

"You are one of the world's best-known chiropterologists."

The professor warmed with gratified vanity.

"Yes," he confessed with a self-satisfied smile, "I believe I have a generally favorable reputation among my colleagues."

"I have something to show you, professor."

"Oh? What is it?"

In a foreign language with which the professor was unfamiliar, the stranger spoke to his peculiar companion; his tone was dull but authoritative:

"Ignacio. Pon el maletín sobre la mesa."

The acolyte approached the professor's desk awkwardly and placed the attaché case upon it.

"Ignacio. Ábrelo."

The queer fellow opened the attaché case and laid it out flat, then stood staring at it stupidly.

"Ignacio," said the stranger, pointing to a corner of the office, "Siéntate en el rincón."

Ignacio shambled over to the corner, turned his back to the wall, and flopped down onto the floor. There he sat

gazing vacantly into space, his shoulders sagging and his legs stretched straight out in front of him.

The stranger pointed with his open hand toward the attaché case, which was filled with thick stacks of paper.

"The product of twenty years of research!" he announced.

"On what subject?"

"Vampire bats."

In the course of his career Professor Mortimer had occasionally been approached by crackpots who insisted on expounding to him some addled theory about bats--usually vampire bats--and he had an uneasy feeling that the stranger was one of them. He was tempted to show him out of the office forthwith, but there was something oddly impressive about the man that made him hesitate. So he merely said in an irritable tone,

"I really don't have time to read through all this."

"Very well, I will give you a brief oral summary. But first ..." -- the stranger was staring intently at the professor -- "But first ... have you perhaps seen me before?"

Professor Mortimer studied the stranger's face. There was something in it that held his attention. Yes, maybe he *had* seen the man before. But where? Then suddenly it came to him:

"Abel Osigul!" he exclaimed.

"That is correct, professor. I am Abel Osigul."

"What on earth happened to you? Twenty years ago you were one of the best students I ever had. I do remember that you were especially interested in vampire bats. You were about to begin a Ph.D. thesis on that subject, and then ... you disappeared. Where have you been?"

"I've been in the wildest corners of Argentina and Paraguay, where I have made discoveries. Astounding discoveries!"

By this time Professor Mortimer was intensely interested. Abel Osigul was no crackpot.

"I traveled to Argentina, of course, to study vampire bats in preparation for my doctoral dissertation. I went through the usual routine, did all the things that Ph.D. students in mammalogy are expected to do. But one thing troubled me. In the course of my studies I had heard persistent rumors of a remote region on the borders of Argentina and Paraguay in which vampire bats were abnormally abundant, large, and voracious. As you know, professor, I am a perfectionist. My research would

have been imperfect if I had not visited the region in question to determine how much, if any, truth there was in the rumors concerning its vampire bats. Consequently, I had to make my way there at any cost.

"Unfortunately, the region was not only inaccessible but was inhabited by the Chabaraní, one of the few remaining tribes to have preserved complete independence from civilization, and so warlike and aggressive that to intrude upon their territory with anything less than a well-armed regiment was said to be virtually suicidal. And any regiment would have perished in attempting to struggle through the vast, fetid swamps that surrounded the country of the Chabaraní.

"I made extensive inquiries, studied old accounts of explorers, travelers, and missionaries, and found that beyond their bloodthirstiness almost nothing was known about the Chabaraní. In 1921 the anthropologist Holmberg departed for their territory with three assistants, intending to carry out an ethnographic study. Some ten months later, alone, grotesquely emaciated, and with his clothing in tatters, he staggered into a frontier settlement. He was hopelessly insane, able only to babble incoherent stories of human sacrifices and unspeakable rites.

"Despite the risk, I had no alternative: In order to complete my research I had to trespass upon the territory of the Chabaraní. Accordingly, I set out from Buenos Aires with a single intrepid companion.

"You are a scientist, Professor Mortimer. You are interested not in adventure stories but in scientific facts. Therefore I will pass over the astonishing hardships and dangers that we had to surmount, and will limit myself to outlining the scientific findings of our twenty years among the Chabaraní.

"As you know, rabies is a disease that originated in the Old World and was transmitted to the New, most likely through dogs brought by Europeans at the time of the Spanish conquest. The disease eventually infected bats, which thereafter became important carriers of rabies. Since bats seldom bite humans, they represent but a slight danger in most parts of the Americas. On the other hand, those parts of South America where vampire bats occur form an exception, for these bats bite mammals, including humans, in the regular course of business. With their fine, razor-sharp teeth they are capable

of making a relatively painless incision, so that a sleeping mammal may not be awakened and the vampire can lick its blood with impunity. Thus the gaucho camping far out on the pampas does not realize that he has been bitten--until he is stricken with rabies.

"Ordinarily the human or animal victim of rabies passes through a stage of irritability during which, in some cases, he may even 'run mad' and attempt to bite every living thing in his path. The course of the illness invariably ends in death. The rabies transmitted by vampire bats, however, has the peculiarity that it takes only a paralytic form: The victim does not show irritability, much less rage, but merely succumbs to spreading paralysis and sinks quietly into death.

"All of the foregoing is well-known scientific fact. Remarkably, however, the Chabaraní told us that the victim of vampire-borne rabies does not always die, but often survives the illness. We did not at first credit their asseverations to this effect. We never took at face value any information provided by the natives without first testing it through observation or experiment in order to separate the kernels of truth from the mass of superstition. In this instance, however, the statements of the Chabaraní were borne out by our own observations: We found that of persons contracting rabies from the bite of a vampire bat, only some seventy percent died of the disease; approximately thirty percent survived.

"We were able to confirm that the rabies virus carried by vampire bats belonged to an aberrant strain, which we called Strain V, distinctly different from the virus of ordinary rabies. Of course, our investigations were hampered by a lack of proper laboratory equipment. Apart from the very little that we had been able to carry with us, we had to work with what we could improvise upon the spot, and only the exceptional ingenuity of Sandoval provided us with means to study the virus at all."

"Sandoval?" asked the professor, with an inquiring glance.

"Ignacio Sandoval, my companion."

Professor Mortimer sat up straight and his eyes widened.

"Ignacio Sandoval! I met him once or twice, many

years ago, at international scientific conferences. He was young but extraordinarily gifted and had already so distinguished himself with his remarkable studies in chiropterology that we all believed he was destined to a career of unexampled brilliance. And then ... nothing more was heard from him. No one seemed to know what had happened to him. He was with you, then, among these Charabani people?"

"Chabaraní. Yes, Ignacio Sandoval was with me, professor. And I must confess that our discoveries owed more to him than they did to me.

"To continue: Like the normal form of the rabies virus, Strain V attacked the brain. As I've said, only about seventy percent of persons infected with Strain V died of the disease, but we found that in another twenty percent of cases, damage to the cerebral cortex was so severe that the victim's capacity for rational thought was almost completely annihilated and he became forever a moron, hardly distinguishable from a person who had been mentally retarded from birth. This, incidentally, explained our observation that persons of subnormal intelligence were surprisingly frequent among the Chabaraní.

"The remaining ten percent of persons infected with Strain V experienced a recovery that, superficially, appeared complete. Further investigation, however, showed that they too suffered certain aftereffects.

"Before leaving Buenos Aires we had made ourselves thoroughly familiar with all available information concerning Holmberg's ill-fated expedition of 1921. Now, in an effort to learn what had happened to him, we asked all natives whom we encountered whether they had ever heard any stories about Holmberg that might have been handed down by their elders.

"One morning a young fellow whom we had not seen before showed up in the village where we were staying at the time. He was covered from head to toe with ghastly tatoos, he had the bone of a human finger thrust through his nose, and his teeth were filed to points, but for a Chabaraní he was a handsome fellow, to all appearances not more than thirty years old at the outside. We asked him the usual questions, and he replied that he himself had seen Holmberg. Obviously he was lying, since he must have been born several decades after Holmberg's visit. So we challenged him to prove that he was telling the truth by describing

Holmberg's appearance. He responded with a description, accurate to the last detail, of Holmberg, of each of his three assistants, and of all of their equipment. It seemed inexplicable. And we subsequently encountered four more natives -- none in appearance older than thirty-five years -- who likewise claimed to have seen Holmberg and were able to give accurate descriptions of him.

"It took us years to unravel the mystery, but unravel it we did. Given our lack of proper laboratory equipment, the biochemical processes involved necessarily remained in many respects obscure, but in general terms what we found was this:

"The Strain V virus infects not only the nervous system but every cell in the human body. In each cell, the virus attaches itself to the chromosomes in such a way that it permanently halts the aging process. Thus, he who becomes infected with Strain V, and survives, will never grow old, but may live forever. The seemingly young Charabaní who claimed to have seen Holmberg had actually done so, but were older than they looked by several decades at the least. Having survived infection with Strain V, they had become immune to old age."

Osigul paused for a full minute before he continued:

"Professor, imagine a man who would intentionally allow himself to be bitten by an infected vampire bat. He would have nine chances in ten of either dying or becoming a moron, and only one chance in ten of surviving with his faculties intact."

Placing his hands on the professor's desk, Osigul leaned over it, his eyes burning with fanatical passion.

"But he who would take such a desperate gamble -- and win it -- would become immortal! Think of it, professor! Immortality! The most sought-after prize throughout the ages! The object of more desire and more yearning than the philosopher's stone, which turns lead into gold! More than the perpetual-motion machine, the inexhaustible source of energy! More than the panacea, which cures all diseases -- with the exception only of old age!"

Osigul straightened up and continued in a more sober tone.

"We found, however, that there was a catch. When a person has survived the acute stage of infection with Strain V, the infection nevertheless persists in low-grade, chronic form. Fortunately, there is a factor in normal human blood -- we called it the C factor -- that limits the activity of the virus so that the patient can live without suffering perceptible

harm as long as the C factor is present. Less fortunately, the virus gradually impairs the body's capacity to secrete the C factor. Thus, after living with the chronic infection for three or four years, the patient is no longer able to produce the C factor in sufficient quantity, and the virus begins slowly to kill him. His life may drag on painfully for a few years, but in the end he will die... unless he can replenish his supply of the C factor from some source outside his own body. What this means in practice, professor, is that, in order to preserve his immortality, the patient must from time to time acquire a fresh quantity of the C factor by drinking the blood of a living human being."

Professor Mortimer had been listening spellbound to his former student, his jaw slack, his mouth open, and his eyes glazed. Now suddenly he seemed to come to himself. He stood up abruptly and snapped,

"Look here, Osigul! Do you actually expect me to believe all this preposterous rubbish!?"

Osigul smiled wanly.

"No, professor, I don't expect you to believe it."

He paused briefly, gazing at Professor Mortimer with something like wistful compassion. Then he barked in a peremptory tone:

"¡Ignacio! ¡Cumple con tu deber!"

Instantly Ignacio pounced on the professor, pressing over his nose and mouth a handkerchief saturated with some strong-smelling substance. The professor struggled feebly, but only for a moment, for he swiftly sank into unconsciousness.

* * *

When Professor Mortimer awoke, the sun had already set. He found himself slumped in his chair and his papers strewn in disorder over his desk.

"Strange!" he said to himself. "I've never fallen asleep in my office before. And I've had the oddest dream, too!"

He stood up, and in doing so noticed that he felt extraordinarily weak, as if he had recently lost a great deal of blood. He put his papers in order, took his coat from the hook, stepped out of the office, and locked the

door. Luckily he did not live far from the zoology building, so he felt he would be able to reach home safely in spite of his weakness. He crossed the hall, picked his way carefully down the stairs, and left the building through the main door. As he approached the street his path was crossed by a group of high-spirited children wearing costumes. He had forgotten that it was Halloween. A child dressed as a vampire called out, "Trick or treat!" Professor Mortimer fished a quarter from his pocket and held it out toward the boy.

"Here, son," he said.

"I'm Dracula! I want a pint of blood!"

The professor muttered to himself, "Cheeky kid!" and tossed the coin in the boy's direction. Then pensively he turned his steps homeward.